

7-12-1954

Correspondence, John C. Stennis, July 12-15, 1954

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32
School Segregation
United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

July 12, 1954

██████████
Superintendent
██████████

Meridian, Mississippi

Dear ██████████

This is in further answer to your recent letter regarding the Supreme Court decision in the school segregation cases. As you know, I recently made two public speeches in Mississippi which reflected my ideas on the subject. Further examination and consideration of the problem confirms rather than alters these views. I shall discuss this question first from the standpoint of possible legislation, and then from what I shall call local action.

Federal Legislation

You will recall that in 1951 the President attempted to seize the steel mills, and in 1952 the Supreme Court held that he had no such power. If they had held to the contrary, I think federal legislation or a Constitutional amendment could have been passed to reverse their holding. However, the political situation is far different in this school question because it involves a racial matter.

In 1948 or 1949, Southern Senators sponsored a State Compact resolution authorizing several Southern States to enter into a compact supporting Meharry College in Tennessee as a negro medical school. The resolution was debated in the Senate, finally sent back to the Committee by a majority vote, and was never revived by its sponsors because we knew that on a direct vote the resolution would lose by several votes. Of course, since the recent Supreme Court decision, sentiment against national legislation curbing type the decision pose would be much stronger than in 1948.

Another part of the political picture is that even though it may be denied by some, the cold facts are that the present Eisenhower administration helped inspire, and is solidly behind the Supreme Court decision, as was evidenced by Attorney General Brownell's brief claiming that the Court not only had the authority, but was under duty to render such an opinion. Also, the Administration is out to make Washington a "model city" on the question

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of non-segregation, not only in schools but everywhere else. All of the Republican Party, and the Northern wing of the Democratic Party, are strongly in favor of the Supreme Court decision from a political standpoint, and as a matter of fact, it was quite popular among large segments of our population in most areas of the Nation, being endorsed by the National Education Association with only two dissenting votes, and by all of our church organizations. I mention these facts to show the futility of any attempt for federal legislation on the subject. Frankly, I think that a bill to alter or modify this Supreme Court decision would probably be quickly converted into the provision to implement the decision.

State Legislation

The final decision of the Supreme Court will doubtless give some ground rules that will permit zoning by local school districts. This may help solve the problem in places, but I think it would be a great mistake to rely on this altogether.

Some have proposed that we abolish the public school system and provide a tuition fund for each individual child, turning over, I suppose, our present school buildings to individuals, in which private schools would be conducted. There is very grave and serious doubt as to whether or not such a plan would stand if admission to any such school was denied on account of color. A system might be upheld which had one school for the whites, one for the colored, and another school for those to which both white and colored would go if they wished. Of course it could be that we could be driven to the position of abolishing our public schools, but I believe we are far from that necessity yet, and that such a step creates numerous additional and far-reaching problems and does not solve any present problems. It would bring a certain deterioration in our entire school system and in the teaching profession in our State, with a few exceptions.

We can doubtless pass some State legislation that will be helpful, the details of which I will not try to cover here, but in my opinion no mere system of law is going to solve our problem nor begin to meet the situation unless there is a strong, affirmative school program at the local level that is based upon a definite plan of a greatly improved school system for our colored citizens and their cooperation in such a plan for the improvement of their schools, along with a continued program of separate schools for the races. Our negroes know that the most of their race, and all of the white race, want separate schools. They further know that the Federal government is not going to furnish schools for them and that they themselves cannot vote money out of the County treasuries and the State treasuries to support their schools. They know further that the road to progress and better opportunities is through cooperation with, rather than adverse action to the white people.

I think we are face to face with the proposition in Mississippi that if we want a segregated school system, and we definitely do, then we must pay for it. Further, we must furnish the leadership in each county that will assure such a program. In our efforts to have separate schools, if we depend on merely "passing a law", we will probably eventually lose, but an affirmative program, well planned in advance will win, and to this end I would certainly support a well-planned, affirmative program that would bring our colored schools up to standards comparable with our own. This of course cannot be done at once but will require several years. There is time to plan such a program and to gradually put it into effect. There will doubtless be litigation in places that will continue various phases of this matter for a good number of years, but a purely negative program will not meet the problem.

I hope that the school people of Mississippi will never agree to any proposed constitutional amendment whereby the entire public school system could be abolished. Granting that some areas of the State may have to adopt such a plan, I am firmly convinced that great areas of our State can and will work out a positive, affirmative program at the county level for separate schools, and that this plan will continue for many years to come. It seems to me that we should have a state-wide group to map out tentative steps for a voluntary plan at the county level, and then see that those interested in each county are formed into a county committee to take this up with local colored leaders. When the local colored leaders endorse such a plan, publicity should be given to their statements, which will tend to generate a wholesome, down-to-earth sentiment among both groups.

As I said in Meridian, this is a subject that lends itself to demagoguery and is a subject on which the feelings of all of us can be inflamed; but such matters do not solve our problem, and that problem is the education of our youth and the keeping of the bloodstreams of the two races separated. This problem can be met, and I believe it will be met, by the parents of our State who are vitally concerned in the training of their children. I think the leadership must come in a large part from members of your own great profession, and to that end I suggest that the State Superintendent of Education, along with an advisory council from your profession, consider outlining a five-year program or a ten-year program of school improvement, then get this program down in a rough way to the county level and get it before the leadership of each race. This is not a problem of a day or a year, but a problem of a generation, and plans must be laid accordingly.

With fond good wishes for your continued welfare, I am

Your friend,

John Stennis,
United States Senator

JCS/eh

[REDACTED]
OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

MERIDIAN, MISS.

July 15, 1954

RECEIVED
JUL 16 1954
WASHINGTON

Senator John Stennis
Senate Office Building
Washington, D. C.

Dear Senator Stennis:

I have read with a great deal of care and interest your very inclusive letter of July 12. I heartily concur with the sentiment in it and I believe every line of it. You have taken very high ground; any other position you would take would be out of character for you.

You will be interested to know that some of us are taking steps to do the things that you suggest in your last paragraph.

The discouraging feature of this matter is that many people who should take a more constructive viewpoint are blocking every effort to provide equal facilities without which we cannot hope to do much.

With kindest personal regards, I am

Yours very truly,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
Superintendent

LOT:sr